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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE PROGRAMME OF THE UNITED NATIONS
HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Forty-seventh session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 507th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Monday, 7 October 1996, at 10 a.m.

Temporary Chairman: Mr. LARSEN (Denmark)
Chairman: Mr. MCHUMO (United Republic of Tanzania)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.30 a.m.

OPENING OF THE SESSION (agenda item 1)

1. The TEMPORARY CHAIRMAN declared open the forty-seventh session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme.

STATEMENT BY THE OUTGOING CHAIRMAN

2. The TEMPORARY CHAIRMAN, speaking as Chairman of the forty-sixth session, said that although UNHCR's burden of work had been far heavier during the previous two years than during any other period in its history, it had never failed to perform its obligation to mitigate the suffering of the millions of individuals who needed its assistance throughout the world. Reduction of the number of refugees to an acceptable level was the responsibility not only of the countries directly involved but also of the United Nations agencies and NGOs active in the humanitarian sphere, and in particular of UNHCR. Effectiveness required foresight and the adoption of preventive measures, rapid, coordinated action, and follow-up if necessary. Key factors included managers who were respected by their staff, smoothly running machinery, sound management, transparency and responsibility. In all those spheres, UNHCR ranked among the best. Its positive attitude to the criticism and advice addressed to it would enable it to overcome its shortcomings and to achieve even better results, which was important to keep the confidence of donor countries and members.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS (agenda item 2)

3. The TEMPORARY CHAIRMAN invited members of the Executive Committee to make nominations for the office of Chairman.

4. Mrs. ANDERSON (Ireland) nominated Mr. Mchumo (United Republic of Tanzania) for the office of Chairman.

5. Mr. YIMER (Ethiopia) and Mr. BURUSAPATANA (Thailand) seconded the nomination.

6. Mr. Mchumo (United Republic of Tanzania) was elected Chairman by acclamation.

7. The TEMPORARY CHAIRMAN invited members of the Committee to make nominations for the office of Vice-Chairman.

8. Mr. KOLOSSOVSKY (Russian Federation) nominated Mr. Skogmo (Norway) for the office of Vice-Chairman.

9. Mr. KHALID (Pakistan) and Mr. THEAULT (Canada) seconded the nomination.

10. Mr. Skogmo (Norway) was elected Vice-Chairman by acclamation.

11. The TEMPORARY CHAIRMAN invited members of the Committee to make nominations for the office of Rapporteur.

12. Mr. SPIEGEL (United States of America) nominated Mr. Schoof (Germany) for the office of Rapporteur.

13. Mrs. GHOSE (India) seconded the nomination.

14. Mr. Schoof (Germany) was elected Rapporteur by acclamation.

15. Mr. Mchumo (United Republic of Tanzania) took the Chair.

STATEMENT BY THE CHAIRMAN

16. The CHAIRMAN said that at the beginning of 1996 UNHCR had been responsible for 26 million individuals, slightly more than half of whom were refugees. Although the figure was slightly lower than that for the previous year, the scale and complexity of current problems and the volatile situation in a number of the world's regions remained a source of acute concern. Recent emergency situations had placed UNHCR in an ever more difficult financial situation and it was impossible not to be increasingly concerned by the fact that refugee movements were likely to pose a serious threat to national, regional and even international security, especially when they affected countries of asylum whose economic and social situation was already seriously strained. In the circumstances, it was clearly necessary to continue to promote solution-oriented and preventive approaches that responded to the needs of refugees without harming the legitimate interests of countries of asylum and origin. The Executive Committee's debate on the pursuit and implementation of durable solutions, including the notion of prevention, would be particularly opportune.

17. The previous year had also seen a number of positive developments, particularly in South-East Asia and Mozambique, which gave grounds for optimism that voluntary return was in many cases a realistic solution. It had been impressive to witness how UNHCR had been able to work together with UNDP and other development actors and to fit refugee integration activities into a commonly agreed, longer-term framework. The same concern to find solutions and to favour prevention had been apparent in the development of a comprehensive approach to the problems of refugees, returnees, displaced persons and other victims of involuntary displacement in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and relevant neighbouring States.

18. In the Great Lakes region of Africa, however, an effective approach to solutions remained elusive. The humanitarian situation there was an enormous challenge to UNHCR, to the countries of the region and to the international community as a whole. There were still more than 1.6 million Rwandan, and almost 300,000 Burundi refugees whose upkeep was an enormous burden for the countries of asylum. The consequences for the peace and stability of the whole region could be catastrophic unless solutions were found to that humanitarian tragedy. It was to be hoped that UNHCR and the Executive Committee would find means of developing further comprehensive and regional approaches drawing together the necessary humanitarian, diplomatic, political and developmental elements to bring about durable solutions.

19. The short-term rehabilitation assistance provided by UNHCR needed to be linked to a broader reconstruction and recovery strategy ensuring continuity from initial recovery to sustainable development. Due consideration should be

given to the situation of asylum countries which had been affected by the presence on their territory of a large number of refugees. The Executive Committee would undoubtedly wish to continue to keep that matter, including its inter-agency aspects, under close review. More than ever before there was a need for international solidarity, both in terms of the funding of refugee programmes and of the moral and political support that Governments could provide in the search of solutions. While it was appropriate to reassert the obligations of countries of asylum, it was also necessary to recognize the right of those countries, and in particular those with fragile economies, to exist and develop in security and therefore to receive as much assistance as possible to enable them to meet their international obligations without undermining social and economic development, security, the environment, public order and their overriding obligations towards their own population.

ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS (agenda item 3)

20. The CHAIRMAN drew the attention of members of the Executive Committee to document A/AC.96/XLVII/L.1 containing the provisional annotated agenda. If there were no objections, he would take it that the Executive Committee wished to adopt the annotated agenda.

21. It was so decided.

22. The CHAIRMAN said that a number of unofficial consultations had been held on the basis of the work undertaken by the Standing Committee and that the decisions and conclusions reached would be presented subsequently to the Executive Committee for adoption.

23. It was so decided.

ANNUAL THEME: THE PURSUIT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF SOLUTIONS (agenda item 4) (A/AC.96/863, 867 and 872)

24. The CHAIRMAN invited Mrs. Ogata, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, to address the members of the Executive Committee.

Introductory statement by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

25. Mrs. OGATA (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) congratulated the new Chairman of the Executive Committee, whose country remained at the forefront of one of the most serious refugee crisis in recent times.

26. Since the previous session, there had been no new humanitarian emergencies on the scale witnessed during the first half of the 1990s. However, the international environment remained volatile and armed conflicts in Burundi, Chechnya in the Russian Federation, Liberia, Sudan, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan and, most recently, Iraq, had again forced people to flee for their lives. The world's refugee population had fallen from 14.5 million in early 1995 to 13.2 million at the beginning of 1996. However, while in many parts of the globe considerable progress had been made towards durable solutions, new challenges remained in several post-cold war conflicts.

27. She welcomed, among other things, the accession of South Africa to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and to the

OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, as well as the adoption, within the European Union, of a common interpretation of the Convention's definition of a refugee, all of which should further strengthen the international protection regime.

28. The core values of safe and adequate protection were the central concern of her Office. In order to preserve them, it was above all crucial for the international community not only to reaffirm, but also to respect the principle of non-refoulement. Protecting from danger lay at the heart of protection and reflected fundamental values common to all cultures.

29. In many countries in the industrialized world the processing of asylum requests, whose number had continued to decline in 1996, had become much swifter. Although manifestly unfounded and abusive requests for asylum had not disappeared, the time had come to dedramatize the problems of asylum in political rhetoric and in the public mind, and it was essential for States to continue to differentiate between those seeking protection and those seeking better opportunities.

30. More attention should be paid to international burden-sharing, for the burden was unevenly distributed among and within continents. Germany was host to more Bosnian refugees than all the other countries in Western Europe combined. She was extremely concerned about the fact that appeals such as those by UNDP and UNHCR to alleviate the huge environmental and other damage in eascern Zaire and western Tanzanian had gone largely unheeded.

31. It was essential to preserve the humanitarian character of asylum, by receiving refugees away from borders, by halting military activities in refugee camps and by obliging refugees to respect the law. Refugees were entitled to freedom of opinion and expression. However, countries of asylum could restrict the political activities of refugees as the humanitarian and non-political character of asylum could be endangered if their freedom of expression were boundless.

32. The risk of tension between States was compounded when people guilty of genocide or other heinous crimes abused international protection. For that reason, the Office had officially excluded from its mandate all those Rwandans who had been indicted by the International Tribunal for Rwanda. It was also designing guidelines which should help both its own staff and States to handle the difficult question of exclusion as consistently as possible. The Office also had to deal with the huge challenge of reconciliation in the transition from conflict to real, lasting peace.

33. The situation in Bosnia and Rwanda demonstrated that it was insufficient to establish military peace. The establishment of civil peace in those countries required just and humane solutions for those who had been deliberately chased away. Whereas in almost all conflict situations solutions to refugee problems required some form of peace, the reverse was often equally true: humane solutions were essential for peace.

34. Perhaps nowhere was the link between refugee problems and peace and security more evident than in the Great Lakes region in Africa. After 15,200 Rwandan refugees had been turned back from Burundi in late July, the

ongoing turmoil there had prompted virtually all the 65,000 remaining Rwandans to repatriate, with the material assistance and monitoring of UNHCR.

35. While the humanitarian assistance and protection provided by UNHCR served an innocent, silent majority of needy and anxious refugees, they also served the militants who had an interest in maintaining the status quo. In order to bring about large-scale repatriation, UNHCR had formulated a set of proposals on which it hoped shortly to reach agreement with affected and interested Governments.

36. As for Bosnia and Herzegovina, UNHCR estimated that since the Dayton Agreement, 250,000 people had already settled or resettled in areas where their group was in the majority. Following the recent elections, work had begun on the building of common institutions. Moreover, reconstruction work was gathering pace.

37. The difficulties in Bosnia and Rwanda should not obscure the historic progress made in resolving forced displacement problems elsewhere. The process of reconciliation in Guatemala, South Africa and Mozambique was highly encouraging. In Mozambique, despite 17 years of atrocious conflict, it had been possible peacefully to reintegrate 1.7 million refugees and, in July 1996, UNHCR had been able to end its involvement there.

38. Many other countries were making progress towards durable solutions. She referred specifically to the progress made in Mali, in Viet Nam within the framework of the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) which UNHCR had been able to conclude at the end of 1996, in Togo, Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan and in Angola. She hoped that following the recent events in Afghanistan as many refugees as possible would start the journey home, and counted on a favourable solution to the problems of the refugees from Myanmar and Bhutan.

39. She said that her overview should provide hope. Refugee problems were less insoluble than they often appeared to be. In many cases, however, their solution required time. In situations where refugees had fled from war, and although they increasingly returned or were forced to return to unstable situations, real progress towards peace was almost always a prerequisite for ending their predicament in a lasting manner.

40. Although peace could not be imposed from outside, international cooperation and involvement were in many ways indispensable to solve problems of forced displacement. In that context she referred to the predicament of 750,000 Liberian refugees. International cooperation implied, in the first place, the responsibility of countries of origin to readmit their citizens, whether refugees or asylum-seekers. However, it was occasionally necessary to complement voluntary repatriation with other pragmatic solutions.

41. It had become very clear that the international community should help countries emerging from conflict to cope with the complicated transition from war to peace, and to reactivate their economy. The absence of visible peace dividends could clearly compromise the process of peace-building. As to the challenges posed by the return of refugees to their country of origin and by reconciliation, the building of fair systems of justice and efficient mechanisms for property restitution had proved to be increasingly important.

42. In the context of refugee protection and assistance, the international community and UNHCR should devote greater attention to the needs of women and children. She intended carefully to examine the recommendations made in the study by Mrs. Graça Machel on the impact of armed conflicts on children.

43. UNHCR's next objective would be to improve the design and implementation of its contributions, however modest, to the task of averting population displacements. By injecting some humanity into conflict situations, humanitarian action could help to contain them, to prevent them from spilling over and to avert refugee flows. By giving priority to the reinsertion of returnees in their community on the one hand and to reconciliation on the other, UNHCR could help to prevent the recurrence of conflict. However, more efforts were necessary in the following areas: the reduction of statelessness, strengthening the capacity of local NGOs and administrative structures, humanitarian advocacy and encouraging regional dialogue. Local institutions and NGOs were crucial not only for protection and rehabilitation, but also for reinforcing good governance.

44. On the basis of UNHCR's satisfactory experience with the CIS Conference, she had decided, in close consultation with the Secretary-General, to explore the possibility of a similar process for the countries of Central and South-West Asia, which had continued to extend their hospitality to refugees in the best tradition of Islam.

45. She then referred to the most crucial objective for the coming period: delivering the changes necessary for UNHCR to perform better with less (Project Delphi). The purpose of Project Delphi was nothing less than to give UNHCR better tools to perform its central mission of ensuring international protection and developing durable solutions, in an ever more complex and critical environment.

46. UNHCR's programmes and operational structure would be based on better defined objectives, tailored to the needs of each situation, while at the same time being consistent with its overall strategic objectives. She was pleased that UNHCR had been able to start implementing Project Delphi, and noted that she had reorganized the senior management structure. UNHCR was also making progress towards developing clearer policy directives and had issued a global strategy paper, which should provide information about the Office's policy and decision-making process.

47. On the human resources side, UNHCR had launched a new career management system. She hoped that, as a result of the rationalization of working methods and of delegating greater authority to the field, UNHCR would need fewer human resources, particularly in Geneva. The full support of the Executive Committee would promote the process of change at UNHCR.

48. The Office was trying to do its best, but needed the Executive Committee's unswerving moral and financial support. Out of a total budget of US$ 1.3 billion, the contributions paid since 1 January 1996 so far amounted to only US$ 776 million. The operations under way in the former Yugoslavia and in Africa were severely affected. For that reason she appealed to donors to make an extra effort. International protection and the implementation of durable solutions was an enormous challenge. More than ever, UNHCR counted

on the cooperation of all Governments, other United Nations agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the NGOs.

49. Mrs. ANDERSON (Ireland), speaking on behalf of the European Union, said that the theme adopted by the Executive Committee, namely, the pursuit and implementation of durable solutions (A/AC.96/872), was of crucial importance. UNHCR had been seeking lasting solutions to the problems of refugees for 45 years, and three broad solutions had stood the test of time: voluntary repatriation which, when it took place in accordance with the principles of international protection, was in most cases the ideal long-term solution; local integration, which occasionally required international cooperation to support the countries of asylum; and resettlement, which called for international solidarity. Those three solutions committed States - both countries of origin and of asylum - to apply the rule of law and to protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of refugees. Conversely, refugees had to respect the community and environment in which they resettled.

50. However, prevention was still the most lasting solution. UNHCR, which possessed an extensive network of field offices, could provide early warning to the international community of potential or emerging crises. Moreover, global approaches, such as that adopted in the case of the CIS countries, should above all be supported by the political will of all the parties concerned. They also required careful planning and should ensure the safety and dignity of refugees.

51. As the Note on International Protection (A/AC.96/863) implied, experience of operations on behalf of refugees had perhaps been fallible, particularly in Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda and Burundi. In the Great Lakes region, despite all UNHCR's efforts and the development of the Bujumbura action plan, voluntary repatriation had not been possible because of a lack of sufficient political will. It had become clear that UNHCR alone could not solve a problem that required a concerted effort by the United Nations system as a whole. Only a political settlement would provide a durable solution to the humanitarian problems in that region. The European Union would cooperate with UNHCR, the Governments of the region and other donor Governments in seeking acceptable and realistic ways of tackling the problem in a wider political context. In that regard, she congratulated the High Commissioner on having recently decided to exclude persons indicted by the International Tribunal for Rwanda from refugee status.

52. Positive changes had taken place in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the European Union believed that the return of refugees and displaced persons had to be flexible. UNHCR should play a leading role in that process, in accordance with the Dayton Agreement and the operational plan proposed in 1996 by the High Commissioner. It was also essential that the parties concerned should cooperate and coordinate their activities at all levels. Some solutions had been successfully implemented, notably in Mozambique, within the framework of the International Meeting of the Follow-up Committee of the International Conference on Central American Refugees (CIREFCA) and during the implementation of CPA. However, it would be necessary to analyse and define UNHCR's role in situations of political instability and of failure to respect human rights and the principles of law. Liberia was a classic case of such a situation.

53. Good progress had been made over the previous 12 months in implementing Economic and Social Council resolution 1995/56 on the strengthening of the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations. The relevant international organizations had, by and large, laid the groundwork for a comprehensive strategy. The European Union believed that the Standing Interagency Committee should be the primary mechanism for such coordination and an instrument for action-oriented policy guidance.

54. Its contribution of some US$ 510 million in 1995 made the European Union UNHCR's largest donor and reflected its constant concern for the plight of refugees and internally displaced persons. The Union also recognized that numerous developing countries had to bear an increasingly heavy burden, and the search for durable solutions should be a joint effort - a partnership between developed and developing countries. Lastly, she paid tribute to UNHCR's dedicated staff, which had made tremendous efforts to grapple with a range of crises, often at the risk of their lives.

55. Ms. OAKLEY (United States of America) said that, under Mrs. Ogata's outstanding leadership, UNHCR had developed innovative and comprehensive approaches to the complex problems of population movements. In order to finance the follow-up to the CIS regional conference held in May 1996, the United States Government had just contributed US$ 1.5 million to the first appeal issued jointly by UNHCR and the International Organization for Migrations (IOM).

56. There was no doubt that voluntary repatriation was the preferred solution to refugee problems. However, it had to be accompanied by community-based efforts to achieve sustainable development, with an emphasis on returnee communities. Moreover, although UNHCR could contribute to refugee reintegration, the operation's success depended on the political will of the countries concerned and on sustainable development actions. In that connection, the efforts to revitalize the Horn of Africa's Inter-Governmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD) should be commended.

57. UNHCR's senior management had undertaken an ambitious task in reviewing measures to ensure a constant focus on durable solutions and disengagement. In an environment of increasing needs and diminishing resources, UNHCR was obliged to think through ways of concluding its operations. Its action in Mozambique had demonstrated that, by means of advance planning and early discussions among key actors, the humanitarian community could disengage smoothly. The United States encouraged UNHCR to develop its cooperation with UNDP in order to generalize the success of operations such as that in Mozambique. Her delegation was also thankful that there were situations where refugees no longer feared persecution, and was of the view that the time had come to consider invoking the cessation clause in areas where refugee problems were on the way to being solved.

58. The Great Lakes region of Africa posed an enormous challenge to UNHCR and to the international community, and it would be necessary to break an intolerable and unsustainable status quo. The international community would continue to provide assistance, but the countries of origin and asylum must assume greater responsibility. Together with other concerned Governments, the United States proposed a range of measures including camp consolidation, targeted application of the cessation and exclusion clauses and phasing

out assistance to existing camps that were too close to borders, while providing viable alternatives for those who continued to fear return.

59. As for the problem of Guatemalan refugees, she welcomed Guatemala's commitment to reintegrate them and Mexico's generous offer of permanent resettlement. Regarding third-country resettlement, UNHCR's efforts over the previous year to draw increased attention to resettlement programmes were especially encouraging. Moreover, the United States believed that the Standing Interagency Committee was currently the best rapid response mechanism to complex emergencies, provided that participating agencies were parties to the process.

60. As Mrs. Ogata had observed, it was disturbing that refugee protection was under serious threat because some countries were forcibly returning people who had been persecuted or tortured in their own country. Care should be taken to ensure that States assumed their legal and moral responsibility to protect persons in danger. Referring to the question of unaccompanied refugee children, she said that in 1994 and 1995 the United States had contributed generously to the creation of a Regional Support Unit for Refugee Children. The time was right to evaluate its use as a starting point for an assessment of progress in implementing the guidelines on refugee children. As for the situation of refugee women, the internal reference group on refugee women was turning rhetoric into action. In that regard, the United States Government had contributed US$ 200,000 to a fund set up by UNHCR on behalf of refugee women. In addition, President Clinton had announced that the United States would contribute US$ 5 million to create a fund for the advancement of Bosnian women, under the auspices of UNHCR.

61. She also said that in 1996 her Government's contributions to UNHCR had amounted to almost US$ 254 million, i.e. almost US$ 30 million more than in 1995. Lastly, she commended the ambitious changes currently under way in UNHCR, and in particular the efforts made to reform the organization in order to respond more efficiently. However, despite the efforts made by the High Commissioner to ensure the advancement of women in the Office, there was only one woman - with the exception of the High Commissioner herself - among the 18 proposed senior managers.

62. To conclude, she paid tribute on her own behalf and on that of her Government to the thousands of UNHCR staff working for refugees throughout the world.

63. Mr. BURUSAPATANA (Thailand) said that the success of CPA was most gratifying. Seven years after its inception, only a handful of Vietnamese and Lao, who would moreover shortly be repatriated, remained in Thailand. He paid tribute to the resettlement and donor countries as well as to the High Commissioner and UNHCR's staff for their coordination work and expertise, and to the Vietnamese and Lao Governments for their cooperation in repatriation efforts.

64. Reviewing the implementation of CPA, he said it was a well-balanced instrument which took into account the interests of all parties concerned and addressed all aspects of refugee issues, namely prevention, asylum, refugee status determination, resettlement of bona fide refugees, repatriation of

non-refugees, monitoring of returnees, reintegration and the financing of activities with the assistance of the donor community, including the European Union.

65. From the standpoint of implementation, CPA had for the first time involved all the key actors: countries of first asylum, countries of resettlement, donor countries, UNHCR - as the central coordinator - and above all the countries of origin. The importance of the latter's inclusion was noteworthy, as any durable solution to the problems of refugees depended on addressing the root causes of population movements and on preventive measures. The readmission of non-refugees by countries of origin was another crucial factor. Thailand, for its part, while adhering strictly to its humanitarian tradition, had not yet adopted a policy of local integration or local resettlement.

66. Yet the implementation of CPA was not without shortcomings. It was a compilation of closely interrelated measures to be carried out simultaneously and in full, and all parties must adhere strictly to and respect their obligations without making exceptions. Disinformation, which gave rise to misunderstanding and false expectations on the part of refugees and asylum-seekers, threatened to aggravate the refugee problem and undermine the repatriation process. The success of a durable and comprehensive solution largely depended on the will of countries of origin unconditionally to accept the return of their citizens. In that regard, Thailand welcomed the cooperation it had received from Viet Nam and from the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

67. The funding shortfall could be a disrupting element in the implementation of a comprehensive and durable solution. Fortunately, CPA was unaffected by that problem thanks to the generosity and perseverance of the donor community and to UNHCR's excellent coordinating efforts. However, the task of acting as host to refugees entailed not only financial and administrative costs; it also had repercussions on the local population and on the environment.

68. He pointed out that reintegration was a vital element of the repatriation process, as it helped to increase the absorptive capacity of the countries of origin and helped refugees to resume a normal life. However, he believed that there was room for improvement of reintegration. A durable solution to the refugee problem must be purely humanitarian and not political. It had to be comprehensive and to take into account the interests of all concerned. It should reflect the spirit of international burden-sharing and address the root causes of the problem: in other words it should entail development activities. Thailand was convinced that prevention was the best policy and that the socio-economic conditions in the countries of origin should not be disregarded. For its part, Thailand was cooperating with its neighbours, in particular within the Mecong River Commission, and in a variety of economic and technical cooperation activities, to eliminate the causes of the refugee problem.

69. He said that for almost 10 years Thailand had acted as host to 80,000 displaced persons and addressed an urgent appeal to UNHCR to continue its negotiations with the country of origin to permit them to return in safety. Thailand unreservedly supported UNHCR's efforts to strengthen its cooperation

and partnership with other international and intergovernmental organizations in order to cope with the complex refugee problem and to find means of facilitating refugee reinsertion.

70. Mr. RUDDOCK (Australia) said that his presence, as a minister, illustrated the importance attached by the Government of Australia, like other Governments throughout the world, to the question of systems for determining refugee status. Australia was proud that since the Second World War it had unceasingly come to the assistance of the victims of humanitarian crises and provided them with resettlement opportunities. As UNHCR had reported that some people attempted to use asylum procedures to circumvent normal migration criteria, Australia took care to offer assistance only to those in genuine need, and in particular to those in camps overseas.

71. Australia noted with concern that some judicial bodies, including Australian ones, erroneously interpreted the provisions of the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. Although Australia wished to maintain a transparent and fair determination process, it believed that it was important to reduce the processing time and cost of the system, which affected Australia's capacity to assist refugees and to facilitate their settlement. Australia also noted with concern a new trend for some asylum-seekers to prolong their stay in Australia indefinitely, in particular by submitting appeals to international bodies such as the Human Rights Committee on the basis of international instruments other than the Convention. The Government of Australia would not allow the increased complexity of procedures to undermine its system for determining refugee status.

72. In response to those concerns, Australia had implemented two important initiatives. The first had been to set a ceiling of 2,000 on the number of persons who could be granted refugee status in Australia. The second had been to review the immigration and refugee decision-making process in order to provide Australia with an efficient system for assessing applications. Community organizations had been consulted as part of the review process, to which the regional representative of UNHCR in Australia had made a submission. Applications were assessed by officials of the Ministry of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, in accordance with objective criteria, and unsuccessful applicants could appeal to the independent refugee review tribunal. However, there was a danger that scarce resources would be monopolized by cases of doubtful merit.

73. Australia believed that UNHCR should clarify, in conjunction with members of the Executive Committee, the definition of particular social groups. Another central issue was the need for countries voluntarily to accept the return of their citizens who did not meet the requirements to remain in countries such as Australia. The Government of Australia unreservedly supported UNHCR's view that for the vast majority of refugees and displaced people voluntary repatriation, in conditions of safety and dignity, was the appropriate long-term solution.

74. Between July 1995 and the end of June 1996, Australia, in response to UNHCR's appeal, had approved the resettlement of 15,000 refugees, more than 12,000 of whom were from the former Yugoslavia and the Middle East, together with more than 600 others under its Women at Risk Programme. In November, Australia, in partnership with UNHCR, would be host to a conference on

regional approaches to refugees and displaced persons. Australia hoped that the conference, the first of its type in Asia and the Pacific, would be the start of an ongoing dialogue on refugees, displaced persons and asylum-seekers, and would serve as a useful model for other parts of the world. Despite budgetary difficulties, the Government of Australia had maintained the level of its contribution to UNHCR's budget.

75. The Government of Australia had welcomed the recent visit by the High Commissioner, Mrs. Ogata, which had made it possible to strengthen the links between Australia and UNHCR. His delegation commended the role played by UNHCR on behalf of refugees and displaced persons in the former Yugoslavia, in particular through its provision of a "humanitarian space" to permit a political solution to be found to the conflict.

76. All the countries affected by refugee problems and humanitarian crises, together with the relevant international organizations should join in a comprehensive approach. In South-East Asia, CPA had resulted in the return and reintegration of over 88,000 refugees to Viet Nam and the resettlement of over 74,000 Vietnamese refugees, 18,000 of whom had settled in Australia. CPA would never have been successful without the combined efforts of countries of origin, asylum and resettlement, of UNHCR, IOM and other international organizations, together with NGOs. He reiterated Australia's commitment to assisting genuine refugees and said it would continue to pursue a vigorous resettlement programme and support UNHCR's activities.

77. Mr. MAELAND (Norway) said that the theme of the current session, "the pursuit and implementation of solutions" was all the more appropriate because the international community, including UNHCR, was endeavouring to ensure the safe return of large numbers of refugees from Bosnia, Rwanda and other sources of refugee flows. His Government which shared the international community's view that voluntary return was the best solution to refugee problems, commended the High Commissioner's efforts to make States aware of their responsibility to prevent situations that gave rise to refugee flows and to promote conditions conducive to repatriation. In that respect, it was appropriate to reiterate the right of all persons to return to their country and the duty of all States to accept them.

78. The restoration of peace was a key condition for a durable solution to refugee problems in conflict areas and Norway appreciated UNHCR's vital contribution to peace efforts within the framework of comprehensive approaches. Norway had played an active role in seeking peace in areas of conflict where there were large numbers of refugees, most notably in the Middle East, in Central America and in Africa, in most cases in close cooperation with United Nations agencies. Viable solutions demanded that efforts to safeguard human rights should be paralleled by efforts to bring about socio-economic rehabilitation.

79. When repatriation was impossible, the most common solution was local or regional integration. However, the burden placed on the socio-economic infrastructure, the environment and in some cases the security of neighbouring countries was a source of concern. It was essential to develop strategies to enhance the ability of many host countries to continue to offer possibilities for local integration.

80. Resettlement was the third major durable solution. So far only 10 countries had established quotas for the resettlement of refugees. Norway urged other Governments to respond actively to the resettlement needs of refugees in a spirit of burden-sharing. The Government of Norway placed particular emphasis on the needs of two vulnerable groups - women and unaccompanied children. The latter were particularly vulnerable on account of their dependence and developmental needs.

81. His Government attached special importance to the need to strengthen United Nations capabilities for preventive action. In that context, he referred to the initiative of the Norwegian Prime Minister, Mrs. Gro Harlem Brundtland, to establish a fund for preventive action. The High Commissioner could play an important role in preventive efforts, especially through UNHCR's institution-building and training activities as well as its activities on behalf of stateless and internally displaced persons.

82. Norway agreed with the High Commissioner that lasting solutions to complex refugee problems called for comprehensive efforts involving both countries of origin and of asylum. The Programme of Action adopted at the CIS Conference in May at Geneva, which was designed to strengthen the institutional capacity of the CIS countries to develop policies and operational activities that could serve as a model for regional solutions, was of particular relevance.

83. Norway was concerned by the situation of the refugees in the Great Lakes region. UNHCR, the States of the region and donors should all continue to consider measures and strategies to resolve that enormous human tragedy. Humanitarian action should be linked to political measures involving both Rwanda and neighbouring countries, to make it more attractive to refugees to return to their country than to remain in the camps. Norway was a staunch supporter of UNHCR's leadership role in humanitarian operations in the former Yugoslavia, to which it had made a significant material and financial contribution. Following the Dayton Agreement, Norway had contributed to the efforts led by the High Commissioner within the Working Group on Humanitarian Issues to coordinate the safe and orderly return of refugees. Norway intended to continue its close cooperation with UNHCR in the matter.

84. His delegation emphasized that not only UNHCR, but also the United Nations system as a whole should achieve a greater level of predictability and timeliness in emergency responses and the pursuit of solutions. The Government of Norway attached great importance to the implementation of Economic and Social Council resolution 1995/56, and expected UNHCR to continue to participate actively in the Standing Interagency Committee so as to improve coordination and efficiency in the search for solutions to complex emergencies. In conclusion, he commended the High Commissioner for the leading role she played in the humanitarian community and assured her of Norway's continuing support.

The meeting rose at 1.15 p.m.